

FLOOR SPEECH
PUBLIC LANDS PACKAGE
S. 47 – NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT ACT
February 6, 2019

Mr. President, I rise to throw my strong support behind the bipartisan Public Lands Package. This legislation – which puts together over 100 public lands, natural resources, and water bills – protects and expands our nation’s lands and strengthens local economies. This sweeping package shows the country the tremendous amount that can be accomplished when both parties in Congress roll up their sleeves and work together toward a common goal.

While there are certainly other measures I wish we had included in this package, overall, this bill can pass both chambers -- on strong bipartisan votes. I am looking forward to this Congress showing its strong support for keeping public lands in public hands, and protecting them for future generations.

I am particularly proud of provisions in this package that I’ve championed for years to benefit my home state of New Mexico -- starting with permanent reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund is our nation’s most successful conservation program, and is extremely popular with the American people.

Yet – Congress has consistently underfunded it and failed to make it permanent.

I’ve been fighting for years for full funding and permanent reauthorization. The Public Lands Package does just that. This was a law championed by my father in 1965 while he was Secretary of the Department of Interior. I have been proud to carry the torch, working to make the Land and Water Conservation fund permanent.

In New Mexico alone, over 1,200 local projects have been supported by the LWCF since it began in 1965.

Over the last two years, the president has proposed essentially eliminating the LWCF. But in a major step forward – and a major rebuke of the president’s misguided approach – the Senate package permanently reauthorizes the program and provides annual funding of at least \$900 million dollars – all from offshore oil and gas leases and other revenue streams that don’t come from taxpayer dollars.

Giving the Land and Water Conservation Fund permanent authorization is a monumental win for our entire nation. I hope that soon we can secure robust mandatory funding as well. Until then, I will continue to fight with my colleagues -- on both sides of the aisle – to ensure this program receives significant funding each year in appropriations.

The lands package includes my Organ Mountains - Desert Peaks Conservation Act, co-sponsored by Senator Heinrich. Senator Heinrich and I have been fighting to protect this ruggedly beautiful part of Southern New Mexico for years. In 2014, President Obama used the legislation that we wrote as the basis for his executive order creating the Organ Mountains - Desert Peaks National Monument.

The Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks area has contained protected Wilderness Study Areas since the 1980’s and 1990’s. It is high time to make these study areas permanent Wilderness. Senator Heinrich and I have worked closely with all stakeholders – ranchers, conservationists, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and many others – to bring these lands into 10 permanent Wilderness areas. Our bill – S. 441 – places approximately 240,000 acres into Wilderness -- while releasing approximately 30,000 acres so that Border Patrol has the flexibility necessary to keep the border secure. Border Patrol concerns have been addressed, as have the interests of existing grazing lease holders, who will be able to continue to graze their cattle.

The areas targeted for protection showcase sky island mountains, native Chihuahuan Desert grasslands, caves, unique lava flows, limestone cliffs, and winding canyons. The landscapes for designation are tremendously varied -- but here is a photo of one, depicting the Organ Mountains.

Under the 1964 Wilderness Act, “wilderness” is “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” The 10 areas for designation in Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks should remain “untrammeled,” and deserve the special protection that Wilderness designation confers.

Like the Wilderness Study Areas in our newest national monument to the south, Senator Heinrich and I have been working for years to designate two Wilderness Study Areas in our newest national monument to the north as Wilderness. The 13,000 acre Cerro del Yuta and 8,000 acre Rio San Antonio study areas within Rio Grande del Norte National Monument are equally deserving of Wilderness status.

The centerpiece of Cerro del Yuta is Ute Mountain – a 10,000 foot high volcanic dome that overlooks the magnificent Taos Gorge, shown here.

The Rio San Antonio sits 200 feet below a plateau, and creates a unique riparian area and amazing recreational opportunities that boost the local economy.

This designation is also the product of a grass roots coalition of local stakeholders — including sportsmen, small business owners, pueblos and conservationists — who have worked for years to preserve the Rio Grande del Norte area for future generations. Designating Cerro del Yuta and the Rio San Antonio area, under our Cerros del Norte Conservation Act, cements their place as part of Northern New Mexico’s protected heritage.

During the last Congressional session, my good friend, the late Senator John McCain, and I worked hard on the 21st Century Conservation Corps Service Act – or “21-C-S-C” for short. We wanted to make sure that our youth and our veterans have real and meaningful opportunities to serve our country by conserving our great outdoors. This bill re-invigorates public-private partnership between the federal government and the private sector, enabling our youth and veterans to engage in national service on conservation-related projects. And the program targets Native American youth by establishing an Indian Youth Service Corps to work on Indian country priorities.

The bill also expands eligibility, so returning veterans and others can participate in these important programs, it expands the number of agencies that can establish service corps. And it authorizes detailed data collection, so we can track exactly how these programs are helping communities and our public lands.

This kind of program makes so much sense: We have a huge backlog of infrastructure needs on our public lands -- a backlog that is only growing with increased wildfires and natural disasters. Younger workers, especially Native youth, face higher unemployment rates and our veterans face their own set of challenges transitioning to civilian life. Service corps are a cost-effective way to promote conservation goals and fill employment gaps.

This program has broad bipartisan support; support from the Western Governors’ Association, veterans’ organizations, and the outdoor industry. And it would pay special tribute to our late colleague whom we all admire so much. I urge its passage.

One of New Mexico’s most successful watershed management collaborations is the Rio Puerco Management Committee, established in 1996. The Rio Puerco is the largest tributary to the Middle Rio Grande Basin.

The watershed encompasses approximately 4.7 million acres and, unfortunately, is the primary source of undesirable fine sediment delivered to the Rio Grande system. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, on average, the Rio Puerco delivers 78 percent of the total suspended sediment load of the Rio Grande, although it provides only 4 percent of the runoff.

The Rio Puerco Management Program is a community-based approach that brings federal and state agencies, tribes, non-profits, and local citizens together to work on watershed management – including sediment reduction and habitat and vegetation restoration.

The Committee has been widely recognized for its success, earning awards from the Environmental Protection Agency and Bureau of Land Management.

Its most recent 10-year reauthorization ends March 30th of this year. We need to permanently authorize this effective program and the committee – which I seek in S. 2249, the Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program Reauthorization.

Senator Murkowski and Senator Cantwell – I applaud your work in expeditiously bringing this package to the floor.

The 100 bills that compose the Public Lands Package boast 50 different Senate sponsors and nearly 90 co-sponsors. The package represents the hard work of countless individuals and organizations throughout the country – all committed to preserving and protecting our country's greatest treasures. I stand resolutely behind that commitment as well, and urge unanimous passage of this historic package.

Mr. President, I yield.